

## A review: Modified biochar as an adsorbent for phosphorus removal from water

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### Abstract:

In recent years, eutrophication of water bodies has become increasingly severe due to the rising content of phosphorus in these bodies. This escalation adversely affects the normal growth of aquatic organisms, leading to the deterioration of water quality, and ultimately impacting human life. Phosphorus removal is a crucial direction for addressing water body pollution. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to identify efficient, affordable, and feasible methods for removing phosphorus from wastewater. Adsorption, owing to its simplicity, efficiency, and low cost, is widely employed in water treatment. Biochar, in particular, is extensively used due to its high efficiency, renewability, low cost, and the ready availability of raw materials. This paper reviews the preparation methods of biochar and modified biochar, analyses the effects of pyrolysis temperature, solution pH, reaction temperature, adsorbent dosage, adsorption time and co-existing ions on the phosphorus removal of biochar materials. It also explores the necessity of desorption and regeneration of biochar, along with the prospects of biochar in the future of phosphorus removal.

**Keywords:** Biochar; Mechanism; Modified ;Performance; Removal

### Highlight:

- The preparation methods of biochar and modified biochar are summarized in this paper.
- The influencing factors in the adsorption process, such as pH, temperature, dosage, reaction time and co-existing ions, were summarized.
- The main reaction mechanism of phosphate adsorption was summarized in this paper.

Phosphorus is one of the essential nutrients for the growth of all organisms, playing a vital role in both agricultural and industrial systems (Fan et al., 2022). In recent years, with the development of the economy, human activities have become more frequent, leading to increased discharge of pollutants into the water. Among these pollutants, the discharge of phosphorus results in the rapid growth of algae and other plankton in the water body, causing eutrophication. This process decreases the level of dissolved oxygen in the water, deteriorates water quality, and even leads to the death of fish and other organisms in large quantities, disrupting the ecological balance of the water (Zhang et al., 2020a). Eutrophication of water bodies is one of the common environmental problems faced by the world at present, caused by the excessive increase of nutrients in the water body. Common nutrients include elements such as phosphorus (Liu et al., 2022). Generally speaking, eutrophication of water bodies is highly related to anthropogenic factors, such as

the use of phosphorus-containing laundry detergents and the discharge of industrial wastewater. In aquatic environments, phosphorus can exist in a variety of forms, including orthophosphates, polyphosphates, and organic phosphorus. Orthophosphate is the form most readily taken up by plants and is therefore the target of efforts to remove and recover it from water (Zhi et al., 2022).

At present, the commonly used technologies for treating phosphorus-containing wastewater include biological method, chemical precipitation method, adsorption method, ion exchange method and membrane separation method. The biological removal of phosphorus can be divided into two categories. The first is the traditional biological phosphorus removal, where polyphosphorus bacteria release phosphorus under anaerobic conditions. Subsequently, in aerobic conditions, excess phosphorus is absorbed, and the purpose of biological phosphorus removal from wastewater is achieved through the discharge of phosphorus-rich sludge. The second category is denitrification phosphorus removal. Under anaerobic conditions, denitrification by polyphosphorus bacteria releases phosphorus. Then, in anoxic reaction conditions, phosphorus is excessively absorbed through the use of electron receptors. Under the reaction conditions, excess phosphorus is absorbed and nitrate ammonia is reduced to nitrogen, achieving the goals of both biological phosphorus removal and denitrification of wastewater (Gao et al., 2023). Despite the low operating cost of the biological method for phosphorus removal, its operational effectiveness remains unstable. Chemical precipitation method involves adding chemicals to form insoluble phosphate precipitates. Subsequently, solid-liquid separation is employed to remove phosphorus from the wastewater. The chemicals commonly used for phosphorus precipitation mainly includes iron salts, aluminum salts and calcium salts, falling into the three categories (Kang et al., 2017). These salts are effective in precipitating dissolved phosphorus components, promoting the formation of larger particles and agglomerates (Reif et al., 2023). While the chemical precipitation method for phosphorus removal is stable, reliable, and efficient, it comes with a high economic cost. Additionally, it generates a large amount of chemical sludge with a complex composition, making it difficult to manage and prone to causing secondary pollution. This aspect is not conducive to achieving phosphorus recovery and resource utilization. The adsorption method involves adding specific adsorbents to wastewater, where active groups bond with phosphorus to achieve removal. This process allows for both the removal and recovery of phosphate simultaneously. On the other hand, ion exchange method of phosphorus removal relies on exchanging ions and  $\text{PO}_4^{3-}$  in sewage (Zhang et al., 2023b). While effective, the ion exchange method has limitations in terms of exchange capacity. The membrane separation method is a technology that leverages the pore size of the membrane and electrostatic effects. This allows for the selective permeability of different ions under external force, effectively separating phosphorus from solvents in wastewater (Papadopoulou et al., 2023). The operation of membrane technology for phosphorus removal is often constrained by both the characteristics of the membrane and the characteristics of the wastewater.

The adsorption method can reduce the generation of subsequent sludge, offering a low-cost operation. As a result, the adsorption method for phosphorus removal has gradually emerged as a technology with promising application prospects. The key to the success of the adsorption method lies in developing materials with a strong adsorption effect and minimal risk of secondary pollution. In practical applications, it is common to combine multiple methods to achieve higher treatment efficiency. Table 1 shows the adsorption effects of different adsorbents on pollutants.

**Table 1 Adsorption effect of different adsorbents on pollutants**

Absorbent material type	Absorbent material		Modification method	Adsorption efficiency	Reference s
Biomass-based adsorbent materials	Sludge	Activated sludge	Mixing of sludge, eggshells and oyster shells by ball milling	154.18 mg/g	(Li et al., 2023b)
	Agricultural solid waste	Pomegranate arils	Load La, Fe	78.99 mg/g	(Akram et al., 2021)
		Crab Shells	Load Fe	149.27 mg/g	(Xu et al., 2023b)
		Tangerine peel	Load Zn, Ca	52.96 mg/g	(Chen et al., 2022)
		Rice straw	Load La, Ca	84.72 mg/g	(Zhang et al., 2023a)
		Corn Stalks	Load Mg	221.89 mg/g	(Li et al., 2022a)
		Tea leaves	loaded zero-valent iron (physics)	186.2mg/g (Cr)	(Rajput et al., 2023)
		Bagasse	Chitosan biopolymers	37.2 mg/g	(Manyatshe et al., 2022)
		Rice husk	Introduction of the xanthate group	90.02 mg/g (Crystal violet dye)	(Homagai et al., 2022)
	Industrial solid waste	Cinder	Load La, Mg	39.22 mg/g	(Yang et al., 2023)
		Slag	Wet ball mill pyrolysis	39 mg/g	(Zhou et al., 2023)
		Fly ash	Preparation of mesontobermullite	221.2 mg/g	(Wang et al., 2022)

Biochar not only reduces the cost of remediation but also enables the resourceful use of waste (Liu et al., 2023a). Biomass-based adsorbent materials are widely used because of their renewable, sustainable energy, low cost, and easy availability of raw materials (Luo et al., 2020). Biochar-based adsorbent materials are mainly sludge, industrial solid wastes such as steel slag, fly ash, etc., and agricultural solid waste such as straw, rice husk, etc..

## 1 Preparation of biochar

Biochar is a porous, carbon-rich material produced from biomass under high temperature and oxygen-limited conditions (Li et al., 2023a). However, the optimal temperature for the preparation of each biochar varies depending on the feedstock used. Various methods are employed for biochar preparation, typically including high temperature cracking, gasification, pyrolysis, hydrothermal carbonization and microwave thermal cracking.

### 1.1 High temperature cracking

High-temperature cracking is the process of pyrolyzing biomass materials at elevated temperatures in an oxygen-deprived environment to obtain products with different physicochemical properties (Bardi et al., 2023). Manmeen et al (Manmeen et al., 2023) investigated the conversion of durian peels to biochar through slow pyrolysis. The analysis revealed that only the pyrolysis temperature significantly influenced biochar and pyrolyte yields. As the pyrolysis temperature increased, the biochar yield decreased, and the pyrolyte yield increased. This was primarily due to the temperature increase promoting the thermal decomposition of durian peel to produce gaseous products.

## 1.2 Hydrothermal carbonisation

Hydrothermal carbonisation is the process of thermally decomposing organic matter into biochar in a closed system with the presence of water at a certain temperature and autogenous pressure. This method is regarded as a highly promising technology for biochar treatment (Li et al., 2020), enabling the development of functional materials with economic benefits in an environmentally friendly process. The hydrothermal carbonisation method can control the particle size, morphology and surface functional groups of the carbonaceous material (Yun et al., 2022). This control enhances the surface area and porosity of the biochar, making it conducive to adsorption (Wu et al., 2020). Stelgen et al (Inkoua et al., 2022) investigated the pyrolysis of furfural residue (FR), a solid waste from the production of furfural from corn kernels, at different heating rates in the range of 350 ~ 650 °C. The results revealed that, owing to the high ash content of FR, the derived bio-oil was rich in cellulose- and lignin-derived organic matter. The organic components easily underwent cracking, resulting in the formation of biochar and gas. Higher pyrolysis temperatures favored the formation of organic matter with a molten ring structure. Additionally, lower heating rates during pyrolysis led to the production of biochar with increased thermal stability and a higher fixed carbon content, achieved by enhancing the degree of deoxygenation.

## 1.3 Gasification pyrolysis

Gasification pyrolysis is a side reaction in high-temperature gasification, producing material char (Inkoua et al., 2022). Xin et al (Xin et al., 2017) proposed a two-step gasification process for treating cattle manure, studying for the first time the impact of temperature on product distribution and biochar properties in the pyrolysis-carbonization process. It was observed that with prolonged holding time, especially at high temperatures, a portion of heavy hydrocarbons underwent a secondary cracking reaction. Both temperature and holding time exhibited a synergistic effect on the products and mechanism of the pyrolysis-carbonation process. Additionally, as carbonization temperature increased, the surface of the biochar displayed unevenness with multiple cracks and pores in the bulk structure, attributed to the precipitation of volatile components in the pyrolysis-carbonation process.

## 1.4 Microwave Thermal Cracking

Microwave heating method can achieve more uniform heat distribution, higher heating rates and higher temperatures than conventional heating methods. This is because heat is generated inside the core of the target material during microwave heating, as opposed to external heat source. This improvement enhances the quality of pyrolysis products (Xu et al., 2022). On the other hand, the instantaneous control characteristic of microwave heating reduces the thermal inertia of the equipment and improves the control of the heating power. This feature allows for the rapid optimization of the synthesis conditions (Shen et al., 2022). Zhang et al (Zhang et al., 2022) used microwave technology to prepare porous carbon from pyrolysis residue of chili straw. The study revealed that the thermal stability of biochar increased with the rise of pyrolysis temperature, and the specific surface area of biochar also increased accordingly. The porous char prepared by microwave heating exhibited better electrical properties than conventional heating, and the biochar obtained at higher pyrolysis temperatures had a richer pore structure after activation.

## 2 Preparation of modified biochar

While biochar possesses some adsorption capacity, it is limited, necessitating modification to enhance its adsorption effectiveness (Ambika et al., 2022). Modified carbonaceous adsorbents exhibit significantly higher adsorption capacities for phosphate compared to unmodified adsorbents. This is attributed to the

inherent negative charge of most raw carbonaceous adsorbents, which is not conducive to the adsorption of negatively charged phosphate ions. Commonly used modification methods include physical modification, chemical modification, and biological modification.

### **2.1 Physical modification**

Physical modification primarily entails creating additional microporous and mesoporous structures on the surface through processes such as microwave radiation and ball milling. This aims to increase the specific surface area of biochar and enhance its adsorption performance (Huang et al., 2021). The physical modification method is environmentally friendly as it does not involve the use of any chemicals. Microwave radiation involves the emission of energy from the inside out creating an obvious temperature difference inside the biochar. This process induces irregular expansion and contraction promoting the formation of the pore structure of biochar (Lin et al., 2022). On the other hand, the ball mill technique destroys chemical bonds and reduces particle size, effectively increasing the specific surface area of biochar. This innovative method is easy environmentally friendly, economical, fast and solvent-free (Lyu et al., 2018).

### **2.2 Chemical modification**

Chemical modification is a common method because it directly affects the surface chemical properties of biomass or biochar. Examples include acid-base modification, oxidation methods metal loading and others.

The acid and alkali modification method involves treating biochar with acid or alkali to alter its specific surface area. This introduces carboxyl and hydroxyl groups thereby changing the type and number of surface functional groups. These modifications aim to improve the adsorption performance of the biochar. Commonly used acids for this method include HCl, H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>, HNO<sub>3</sub>, etc., and commonly used alkalis are NaOH, KOH, etc..

Oxidation modification generally involves using oxidants as modifiers to enhance the adsorption performance of biochar. Commonly used oxidants include H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>, KMnO<sub>4</sub>, and so on. The metal loading method involves soaking biochar in metal ions, resulting in a larger surface area and active adsorption sites. Since the surface of biochar is often rich in oxygen, nitrogen, sulfur, and other functional groups, it tends to have a negatively charged surface, which is not conducive to the adsorption of anions. The modification of biochar with metals can alter surface properties, such as surface area, surface charge, pore size, and functional groups. Therefore, the use of metal cations can shift the surface charge of biochar from negative to positive, filling the pores with metal ions. This modification increases the porosity of the biochar, thereby improving its adsorption capacity for phosphate (Shakoor et al., 2021). Commonly used modified metals include Mg, Fe, and La. As metal ions are magnetic, their presence can improve the recycling rate of biochar to some extent.

### **2.3 Biomodification**

Biomodification is mainly a method of combining microorganisms with certain functions with biochar to improve its physicochemical properties, specifically low cost and high removal rate (Li et al., 2022b). Table 2 shows the adsorption effects of different modification methods on pollutants.

**Table 2 Adsorption effect of different modification methods on pollutants**

Modification method		Materials	Adsorption efficiency	References
Physical modification	Ball milling	Corn Stover	329 mg/g	(Ai et al., 2023)
		Walnut shells	2750 mg/g (Petroleum pollutants)	(Wei et al., 2023)
	Microwave radiation	Biosolids in clay settling ponds	147mg/g	(Antunes et al., 2018)
		Teak waste	66.69 mg/g (Methylene blue)	(Firdaus Mohamad Yusop et al., 2022)
Chemical modification	Acid modification	Corn cob (H <sub>2</sub> SO <sub>4</sub> )	221.1mg/g (Na <sup>+</sup> )	(Yu et al., 2023)
		Wheat straw (HNO <sub>3</sub> )	46.18 mg/g (Cd)	(Zheng et al., 2021)
	Alkali modification	Lycium barbarum branches (KOH)	769mg/g (Methylene blue)	(Liu et al., 2023b)
	Oxidation modification	Hickory Chips (H <sub>2</sub> O <sub>2</sub> )	310mg/g (Methylene blue)	(Zhang et al., 2021)
		Hickory nutshell, bamboo, wheat straw (KMnO <sub>4</sub> )	189.24 mg/g (Pb)	(Zhang et al., 2023c)
	Modified by metal loading method	Chitosan (La, Al)	264.48mg/g	(Lan et al., 2022)
		Corn stove r (Ca)	33.944 mg/g	(Zhuo et al., 2022)
		Wood chips (Ca, Al, La)	152.9 mg/g	(Cheng et al., 2023)
Biological modification	Attapulгите (Silicate bacteria)	9.54mg/g	(Xu et al., 2023a)	

### 3 Factors affecting the adsorption effect

The effectiveness of pollutant removal depends on both the nature of the adsorbent and the environmental conditions in which it operates. The adsorbent's intrinsic properties, such as surface area, porosity, and chemical composition, play a crucial role in determining its capability to attract and retain pollutants. Simultaneously, the specific conditions of the surrounding environment, including temperature, pH, and the concentration of pollutants, influence the adsorption process. This interplay between the adsorbent's characteristics and the environmental conditions highlights the importance of tailoring adsorption methods to specific pollutants and scenarios. Understanding and optimizing these factors are essential for designing efficient and sustainable pollutant removal systems.

#### 3.1 Pyrolysis temperature

The physicochemical properties of biochar vary greatly with the feedstock and pyrolysis temperature (Wang and Yao, 2023). Pyrolysis temperature not only influence the surface properties of biochar, but also affects its yield. In general, higher pyrolysis temperatures result in an increased number of voids in biochar, a larger specific surface area, and a stronger adsorption effect. However, if the pyrolysis temperature is excessively high, it may lead to the destruction of the biochar's pore structure, consequently affecting its adsorption efficiency. Therefore, finding the most suitable pyrolysis temperatures for different biochar is essential (Zhang et al., 2020b). The organic fraction of biomass consists of three main components: cellulose, hemicellulose and lignin. Under the same pyrolysis conditions, different biomass feedstocks will yield biochar with varying physicochemical properties (Qiu et al., 2022). Different types of biochar possess distinct characteristics such as pore numbers and surface areas, leading to varied adsorption effects on phosphorus in water. Lignin exhibits a broader decomposition range, starting from lower



temperatures and extending to higher temperatures than cellulose, while hemicellulose is more susceptible to thermal decomposition than cellulose (Faleeva et al., 2022). Given the often lower quality of biomass pyrolysis products, catalysts become crucial for improving their quality. In this regard, Ge et al (Ge et al., 2023) investigated additives and catalysts to enhance the quality of biomass pyrolysis products. They introduced appropriate amounts of Fe to carbon nanotubes prepared under conventional pyrolysis conditions and observed that the addition of 10% Fe inhibited the decomposition of functional groups on the surface of lignin while promoting the decomposition of functional groups on the surface of hemicellulose. Simultaneously, diffraction peaks attributed to carbon deposition were observed on the surface of Fe powder. Lignin biochar is characterized by a substantial number of pores, with the pore count increasing upon the addition of iron. Li et al (Li et al., 2023a) explored the impact of pretreatment temperature on the composition and properties of pyrolysis products, focusing particularly on biochar obtained at high temperatures. The study revealed that roasting cellulose from 170°C to 350°C had minimal effects on the total yield of biochar and bio-oil. However, calcination of cellulose at 260°C induced significant structural changes, favoring subsequent cleavage to produce anhydrous sugars and unsaturated oxygenated organics. Furthermore, the study found that cellulose crystals were completely removed at 350°C, forming graphitic carbon.

### 3.2 Solution pH

The pH level not only influences the surface charge of metal oxide composites but also dictates the form of phosphorus in an aqueous solution. Phosphorus in water primarily exists in four main forms:  $\text{H}_3\text{PO}_4$ ,  $\text{H}_2\text{PO}_4^-$ ,  $\text{HPO}_4^{2-}$  and  $\text{PO}_4^{3-}$ . As the pH increases, there is a transition from  $\text{H}_3\text{PO}_4$  to  $\text{H}_2\text{PO}_4^-$ . The proportion of  $\text{H}_3\text{PO}_4$  decreases with rising pH, while the proportion of  $\text{H}_2\text{PO}_4^-$  increases, reaching a peak of 99% at pH 5. Concurrently,  $\text{H}_2\text{PO}_4^-$  undergoes further conversion to  $\text{HPO}_4^{2-}$ . This transformation mirrors the shift from  $\text{H}_3\text{PO}_4$  to  $\text{H}_2\text{PO}_4^-$ . At pH 10, 97.9% of phosphorus exists in the form of  $\text{HPO}_4^{2-}$ . With increasing pH, especially in strongly alkaline environments, phosphorus primarily exists in the form of  $\text{PO}_4^{3-}$  (Fan et al., 2022). Under acidic conditions, excess hydrogen ions can protonate the active adsorption sites, causing the biochar to behave as a weak acid, functioning as an electron acceptor, while the phosphate ion acts as a weak base. Conversely, under alkaline conditions, excess hydroxide groups deprotonate the active adsorption sites on the biochar's surface, making the biochar act as a weak base, and the phosphate ion behaves as a weak acid. Liang et al (Liang et al., 2023) developed an in-situ activation method based on the pyrolysis technique of  $\text{Mg}(\text{NO}_3)_2$  activation, resulting in Mg-biochar adsorbents with abundant fine pores and active sites. The results indicated that the adsorption of  $\text{Mg}(\text{NO}_3)_2$  on biochar was highly dependent on the initial pH of the solution. The maximum adsorption of phosphate nearly doubled as the pH increased from 3 to 9, but significantly decreased when the pH was raised to 13.

### 3.3 Reaction Temperature

During the adsorption process, temperature influences particle diffusion. An increase in temperature accelerates molecule diffusion and the frequency of intermolecular collisions, thereby enhancing the rate of precipitation reactions. Elevated temperature also augments the pore volume and porosity of the adsorbent, facilitating the entry of pollutant molecules to the inner pore surface. However, it's important to note that a higher reaction temperature is not always better. Excessively high temperatures may lead to the desorption of already adsorbed phosphate. Wang et al (Wang et al., 2016), in their lanthanum phosphorus adsorption experiments using oak chips, discovered that a higher adsorption temperature contributes to an improved adsorption capacity for phosphate. As the temperature increased from 15 °C to 45 °C, the amount of

phosphate adsorption rose from 43.70 mg/g to 60.1 mg/g. This phenomenon can be attributed to the intensified random thermal movement of ions in the solution at higher temperatures, enhancing the likelihood of collision between adsorption sites and phosphate ions.

### 3.4 Adsorbent dosage

In the process of removing phosphorus pollutants from water using biochar as an adsorbent, the dosage of the adsorbent is one of the most critical factors influencing the adsorption effect. Selecting the optimal dosage of the adsorbent not only conserves resources but also enhances its utilization. Theoretically, as the adsorbent dosage increases, the number of adsorption sites also increases, leading to an improvement in the adsorption effect. However, this theoretical expectation is not always realized in practice. Studies have demonstrated that when the dosage of biochar reaches a certain threshold, its adsorption capacity exhibits only a minimal increase or remains unchanged with further dosage increments. This phenomenon can be attributed to the rise in active adsorption sites as the dosage of the adsorbent increases. Consequently, the occupancy of active sites on a unit mass of adsorbent decreases, resulting in a decline in adsorption capacity (Li et al., 2023c). Sisay et al. (Begna Sisay et al., 2023), in their investigation of phosphate adsorption by Mg/Zr modified nano-biochar extracted from waste coffee grounds, observed that the removal rate increased with the rise in adsorbent dosage, reaching a maximum at an adsorbent dosage of 40 mg. However, the removal rate started to decrease when the adsorbent dosage exceeded 40 mg. This phenomenon can be interpreted as an outcome of the increased dosage of adsorbent, leading to a rise in adsorbent surface area and the availability of additional adsorption sites. Nevertheless, with a further increase in adsorbent dosage, the particles tended to aggregate, reducing their interaction with anions.

### 3.5 Reaction time

The role of reaction time in the adsorption process is crucial. Over time, the adsorption rate accelerates until the adsorbent surface becomes saturated, at which point the adsorption rate slows down to reach saturation (Qu et al., 2023). Zeeshan et al. (Ajmal et al., 2018) studied on the adsorption, desorption, and regeneration characteristics of ferric iron hydrate, acicular ferrite, and magnetite on phosphates, experiments investigating the effect of reaction time on adsorption revealed that the rate of phosphorus adsorption generally increased with time. However, after a rapid adsorption period of 0 to 120 minutes, the adsorption rate of the tested substances slowed down and eventually saturated. This saturation occurred because, at this point, the surface of the biochar had become saturated, limiting its capacity to receive more pollutants.

### 3.6 Co-existing ions

When utilizing adsorption for the treatment of actual wastewater, the substantial presence of anions in the wastewater can adversely impact phosphorus removal, including  $\text{NO}_3^-$ ,  $\text{Cl}^-$ ,  $\text{SO}_4^{2-}$ ,  $\text{HCO}_3^-$ , etc. In addressing this challenge, Song et al. (Song et al., 2023) quaternised rice straw and loaded it with  $\text{La}(\text{OH})_3$  nanoparticles to create composites with an excellent affinity for phosphates (AM-La). The adsorption capacity of phosphate by AM-La saw a significant increase by 116-125% even in the presence of high nitrate concentration. Additionally, AM-La demonstrated remarkable selectivity for phosphate in the presence of anions such as  $\text{Cl}^-$ ,  $\text{HCO}_3^-$  and  $\text{SO}_4^{2-}$ . The main mechanism driving phosphate removal by AM-La was the synergistic effect of ion exchange, electrostatic attraction, and ligand exchange, leading to the formation of lanthanum phosphate. This was substantiated through characterization conducted before and after AM-La adsorption. The results of adsorption/desorption studies involving phosphate in the presence of coexisting ions and real water samples indicate that AM-La exhibits excellent regeneration capability, showcasing its



potential for practical applications.

#### **4 Desorption and regeneration of biochar**

Phosphate, being a non-renewable natural resource, can be effectively recovered through its adsorption from wastewater, addressing the future demand for this essential element. However, after reaching adsorption saturation, the adsorbent experiences a reduction in pore number and available specific surface area, thereby influencing subsequent adsorption effectiveness. The regeneration of biochar stands out as an ecologically sound, safe, sustainable, and maximally beneficial approach. Gradually gaining cost-effectiveness, finding an advanced resolving agent with commendable adsorption and desorption properties holds the potential to significantly reduce the overall cost of adsorbents.

Currently, the primary methods employed for the recovery and regeneration of adsorbents include magnetic separation, filtration, thermal desorption, and chemical desorption.

Magnetic separation, involving the introduction of metal nanoparticles, is utilized for adsorbent recovery. The maximum adsorption of  $Pb^{2+}$  in wastewater system was 58.5 mg/g by magnetic chitosan-clayite prepared by Rusmin et al (Rusmin et al., 2022). The removal of  $Pb^{2+}$  was 82% after 4 magnetic regenerations. Liang et al (Liang et al., 2022) synthesized metallic carbon containing carbon nanotubes and cobalt nanoparticles, employing it for the removal of ofloxacin antibiotic. The adsorption capacity reached up to 118.3 mg/g and maintained more than 97% efficiency after four magnetic regenerations. Filtration, considered the simplest and most direct method for adsorbent recovery, is easier to implement compared to nano-biochar, which typically has a larger particle size (Baskar et al., 2022). The thermal desorption method involves heating the adsorbent to a specific temperature, breaking the bond between the adsorbent and the contaminant (Momina et al., 2018). Toński et al (Toński et al., 2021) conducted a study on the thermal and chemical regeneration of multi-walled carbon nanotubes at 300°C with a holding time of 2 h. The results indicated that a higher temperature led to a greater loss of multi-walled carbon nanotubes. However, the adsorption capacity remained unaffected even after five contamination-thermal regeneration cycles. Chemical desorption is the use of organic or inorganic solvents to remove or wash off the contaminants from the adsorbent (Gupta et al., 2020), thereby maintaining the adsorption capacity and allowing for reuse. Khenniche et al (Khenniche et al., 2021) prepared ferromagnetic carbon from coffee grounds and employed it as an adsorbent for removing tetracycline from a wastewater system. Chemical regeneration with 0.1 M NaOH resulted in 72% and 40% adsorption for fresh and spent carbon, respectively. Siciliano et al (Siciliano et al., 2021) used 1M HCl for regeneration in an experiment to study the adsorption effect of thermal plasma expanded graphite on methylene blue. After five regenerations, the adsorption efficiency of the dye was 87%.

#### **5 Adsorption mechanism**

The reaction mechanism and adsorption efficiency are highly dependent on the adsorbent's performance. Biochar employs various adsorption mechanisms, including electrostatic attraction, ion exchange, surface complexation, ligand exchange, hydrogen bonding, physical adsorption, chemisorption (Gizaw et al., 2021).

Electrostatic attraction refers to the long-range electrostatic force between the adsorbent and phosphate ions. During adsorption, the protonated surface of the adsorbent attracts phosphate ions, which are negatively charged. The zero-point charge serves as a crucial indicator reflecting the electrostatic effect of biochar. Modification can alter the zero-point charge of biochar, thereby influencing its electrostatic effects. Liu et al (Liu et al., 2021) found that the zero-charge point of biochar was about 7.8 in the experiments to study the adsorption of phosphate by nanoscale-loaded zero-valent iron biochar, when the pH

was low, the main form of phosphorus in the liquid phase was  $H_3PO_3$ , which was unfavourable for the interaction site with positive ions, which resulting in low adsorption capacity. The optimal solution pH for adsorption of  $PO_3\text{-P}$  is 7~9. When  $pH > 9$ , the electrostatic repulsion between  $PO_3\text{-P}$  and biochar is getting stronger and stronger, resulting in the decrease of  $PO_3\text{-P}$  adsorption capacity. Ions were exchanged between the solution and the insoluble solid adsorbent through an ion exchange process. Throughout the reaction process, various functional groups attach to the adsorbent's surface through different modification methods, influencing phosphate adsorption via ion exchange. Surface complexation typically involves two mechanisms: outer-sphere complexation and inner-sphere complexation. In the outer-sphere complexation mechanism, electron transfer occurs between the chemicals. They remain separate before, during, and after the electron transfer, without forming intermediates or breaking chemical bonds. In the inner-sphere complexation mechanism, electron transfer occurs between the complexes through bridging ligands and covalent bond formation (Priya et al., 2022). Intrasphere complexes and electrostatic attraction between positively charged metal and metal oxide surfaces and negatively charged phosphate ions can produce ligand exchange (Shi et al., 2019). In ligand exchange, the ligands, typically ions or natural molecules, play a crucial role. Hydrogen bonds form between hydrogen-containing and oxygen-containing groups. During adsorption, the positively charged hydrogen attracts the negatively charged oxygen ions of phosphate, forming a phosphate crystal structure and facilitating phosphorus removal. If phosphate ions are solely adsorbed through van der Waals forces, the mechanism involved is physical adsorption. The physical adsorption process is straightforward, with relatively low adsorption capacity and weak bonding forces, facilitating the regeneration of the adsorbent. In their study on the adsorption effects of a magnesium-doped biochar/bentonite composite ball, Xi et al (Xi et al., 2022) found that biochar was modified through coprolysis to increase the specific surface area and total volume. The introduction of magnesium particles into the biochar's pore space enhanced the adsorption of nitrogen and phosphorus. In chemisorption, chemical bonds form between the adsorbent and phosphate ions, involving the transfer, exchange, or sharing of electrons between the adsorbent and phosphate ions. Jiang et al (Jiang et al., 2019) utilized taro stover, maize stover, cassava straw, cedar straw, banana straw, and oil tea husk as raw materials for the adsorption of phosphorus in aqueous solution. The primary adsorption mechanisms involve surface electrostatic attraction,  $Mg^{2+}$  precipitation, and complexation with surface hydroxyl groups.

The adsorption mechanism varies among different biocarbon materials, particularly modified materials. Lesaoana et al (Lesaoana et al., 2019) impregnated Hawaiian activated carbon with varying concentrations of sulfuric, nitric, and phosphoric acids (20-60% v/v) and subjected it to heat in a muffle furnace. This was done to enhance the structural properties of the adsorbent and improve the removal of Cr(VI). Functional groups such as CN, NO, sulphur and phosphorus were introduced during this process and Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy showed the presence of CN, NO, sulphur and phosphorus peaks at 1213, 1531, 1204 and 1214  $cm^{-1}$ , respectively, demonstrating that the acid treatment resulted in the effective attachment of functional groups. The surface area of raw biochar increased from 545  $m^2/g$  to 824  $m^2/g$  after acid treatment. The optimum adsorption performance for Cr(VI) after 120 min of contact reaction was 98% at pH 1 and 93% at pH 4. Compared to raw carbon (22.3 mg/g), the adsorption capacity was increased to 40.99 mg/g with 220% (v/v)  $HNO_3$  activator and decreased to 9.66 mg/g with 20% (v/v)  $H_2SO_4$  activator. Jian et al (Jian et al., 2020) found that the mechanism of adsorption of phosphate ions in the characterization of iron-modified biochar mainly involved electrostatic interactions, the presence of hydroxyl and carboxyl groups and protonation of iron oxide resulted in a positively charged surface, and this positive charge contributed to the electrostatic attraction of negatively charged  $PO_4^{3-}$  ions to the surface of the biochar, leading to adsorption. Jiang et al (Jiang et al., 2021) prepared magnesium-modified multi-walled

carbon nanotubes as a novel adsorbent for the recovery of phosphate from wastewater, and the maximum experimental adsorption up to 198 mg P/g. Magnesium modified biochar presents a positively charged surface in solution due to the protonation of magnesium oxide. This positive charge produces a strong affinity for negative ions, leading to  $\text{PO}_4^{3-}$  ion adsorption, and the adsorbed phosphate ions form  $\text{Mg}_3(\text{PO}_4)_2$  precipitation, which is the main adsorption mechanism of magnesium-modified biochar. Deng et al (Deng et al., 2021) prepared a calcium-modified chitosan microsphere for adsorption of phosphate from simulated wastewater by in situ precipitation method. The results showed that the main adsorption mechanism was co-precipitation, where  $\text{PO}_4^{3-}$  ions were adsorbed by  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  on Ca-modified biochar, leading to the formation of the product hydroxyapatite. Luo et al (Luo et al., 2024) synthesised lanthanum-modified natural zeolite for adsorption of phosphorus by precipitation and hydrothermal methods, and the results showed that this adsorbent had an adsorption capacity of 122.7 mg/g, with good phosphorus adsorption and passivation capacity, exceeding most lanthanum-modified materials. Characterisation showed that intrasphere complexation and electrostatic attraction were the main mechanisms promoting phosphate adsorption.

Typically, the removal of pollutants involves the simultaneous operation of multiple mechanisms. Various processes, such as electrostatic attraction, ion exchange, surface complexation, ligand exchange, hydrogen bonding, physical adsorption, and chemisorption, may collaboratively contribute to the overall effectiveness of pollutant removal.

## 6 Conclusions

As a simple, readily available, and environmentally friendly material, biochar holds significant potential for widespread application in water treatment. However, certain challenges still need addressing for further improvement:

- (1) Enhancing the treatment efficiency of biochar or modified biochar in practical water treatment;
- (2) Mitigating pollution during the preparation of modified biochar; common metals used in modification, such as magnesium and lanthanum, incur high costs and are prone to causing secondary pollution;
- (3) Identifying more efficient biochar materials and refining modification methods to increase adsorption efficiency;
- (4) Exploring more suitable desorption methods to enhance the regeneration capability of biochar.

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